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United in diversity? Europarties and their individual members' rights

Isabelle Hertner

Abstract

At a time when most national parties in Europe are losing members, parties at the European level, or Europarties, have introduced membership for individuals. This article is the first to investigate, compare, and explain the individual membership of Europarties. It focuses on the rights of the individual members to participate in the formulation of policies and the selection of leadership candidates. For this purpose, the article develops an index that charts the participatory rights. In doing so, it highlights a high degree of variation between the Europarties. It argues that these differences can be explained through a combination of four factors: the Europarties' electoral successes; the attitudes of the national member parties towards individual membership; the motivation and activism of the individual members; and Europarty funding rules. The article argues that if Europarties want to be seen as 'real' parties, they should grant their grassroots members real participatory powers.

Keywords: Europarties, European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, European Green Party, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, Party of the European Left, individual party members.

1. Introduction

In its guidebook for political work, the Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) notes: 'Membership is everything! Members are your activists, candidates, councillors, MPs and MEPs. Members also do most of the fundraising and campaigning' (ELDR 2011, 47). Yet, across Europe, national political parties have experienced a decline in their membership levels, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the electorate (van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Interestingly, however, the loss of membership has gone hand in hand with the empowerment of the remaining members. Indeed, many parties have recently sought to re-engage with their members by giving them new political rights, such as the power to help select candidates, leaders, and policies. This re-engagement has led to a growing scholarly interest in national parties' mass membership. By contrast, the fact that parties at the European level, or Europarties, have introduced individual membership schemes in the past decade has gone almost unnoticed in the academic literature. This is perhaps unsurprising. After all, Europarties have traditionally been described as 'parties of parties' that were dominated by their member parties (Bressanelli 2013; Johansson 2009). Until recently, membership was indeed restricted to

national parties and a few affiliated associations and organizations, while natural persons had no opportunity to join Europarties directly.

The fact that Europarties now offer individual membership is an important development. It has the potential to alter the linkages between citizens and the European Union. Europarties increasingly form bridges between politicians in the three main EU institutions, and they have the potential to influence the EU's decision-making process (van Hecke 2010; Chrysogelos 2017). Moreover, at a time when the gap between the European Union's citizens and its political elites appears to be widening (Raunio and Mattila 2012) Europarties could constitute an obvious potential democratic link between Brussels and the concerns of ordinary voters (Bardi et al. 2014; Katsanidou and Lefkofridi 2014). Yet, what rights do Europarties offer their individual members? This matters in the long term. Research shows that the majority of national party members want more than just a membership card. They value having influence over party policy (Scarrow 2015, 197).

This article is the first to investigate, compare, and explain the individual membership schemes of the Europarties. In doing so, it is guided by the logic of 'discovery', towards gaining new insights about a political development (Diesing 1971). The purpose of this research is thereby twofold. It first describes the powers that were given to the Europarties' individual members. Second, it develops an index that charts these powers. In this study, all of the 16 currently registered Europarties were originally considered (see table 1 below). It draws on the Europarties' statutes, rulebooks, and websites. In addition, a number of semi-structures interviews were conducted with Europarty officials and a few key individual members in an effort to collect otherwise inaccessible data and understand the politics behind the scenes.¹

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief overview of the Europarties' historical development. This is followed by a discussion of the participatory rights of national party members - the only kind of party membership that has been widely debated and conceptualized in the academic literature. The fourth section first describes the participatory rights that the Europarties have given their individual members and then introduces an index that can be used to measure and compare these rights. It reveals

¹ Eleven semi-structured interviews with officials from seven Europarties were conducted between 2011 and 2017. In addition, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2016 with individual members from ALDE, the EGP, and the PES. These members held key positions inside the members' networks. As requested by the interviewees, all interviews have been anonymized. They are listed in the references in alphabetical order.

a high degree of variation between the Europarties. This variation is explained using four factors: the electoral successes of the Europarties in recent European Parliamentary elections; the attitudes of the national member parties towards individual membership; the activities and motivations of the individual members; and Europarty funding regulations. Finally, in the concluding discussion it is argued that if Europarties are serious in their attempt to become grassroots organizations, they should offer their members stronger participatory rights.

HERE: Table 1: List of registered Europarties (2018)

2. Europarties: History and Organization

The term ‘Europarty’ refers to the transnational, extra-parliamentary federations of national political parties from several EU member states, united by political affinity. These organizations are not identical with the political groups in the European Parliament (EP), although they closely cooperate with each other. The oldest and most established Europarties, the European People’s Party (EPP), the Party of European Socialists (PES), and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) were formed in the run-up to the first direct elections of the European Parliament in the mid-1970s (van Hecke 2010, 400). The European Federation of Green Parties was founded in 1993.² After years of lobbying for legal recognition (Raunio and Johansson 2005), Europarties gained legal status in 2003. Since then, they have disposed of their own funds, which come out of the European Parliament’s budget and the fees paid by their national member parties.³ The increased budget triggered a professionalization of the Europarties’ infrastructure, personnel and communication (Jansen and van Hecke, 2011: 201). In 2008, the regulation was amended to allow Europarties to use their funds for campaigning during European Parliamentary elections.⁴ Six years later, in 2014, another EU regulation was ratified that imposed new rules aiming to make party

² In 2004 it changed its name to European Green Party.

³ Regulation (EC) No. 2004/2003 of the European Parliament and the Council of 4 November 2003 on the regulations governing political parties at the European level and the rules regarding their funding, Official Journal of the European Union, L297/1-4, 15 November 2003.

⁴ Regulation (EC) No. 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and the council of 18 December 2007 amending Regulation (EC) No. 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, Official Journal of the European Union, L343/5-8, 27 December 2007.

funding and decision-making structures more transparent.⁵ Thus, within a timeframe of eleven years, the statutes and activities of Europarties have become much more regulated. At the time of writing, further legislation on Europarty funding and registration was in the making.

Since the early 2000s, a number of new Europarties have been launched, such as the Party of the European Left (EL) and the European Democratic Party (EDP) in 2004; and the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) and the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM) in 2009. More recently - between 2010 and 2015 - five new Europarties were founded, all of which are deeply Eurosceptic: the Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (ADDE), the Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF), the Coalition for Life and Family (CLF), the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF) and the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF).

There still exists an enormous degree of variation between the older Europarties and those that were launched most recently. The older Europarties, such as the EPP, PES, ALDE and EGP, act like extra-parliamentary parties: they coordinate member party policy positions and shape policy agendas at the EU level (Timuş and Lightfoot 2014). In terms of their corporate membership, these Europarties distinguish between full member parties (mainly from EU member states, though some parties allow parties from outside the EU to become full members), associate parties, and observer parties. Their most influential actors are the full member parties whose delegates have the right to vote at the Europarty congress (which is the highest decision-making body) and to participate in high-level working groups together with Europarty officials. Here, many important strategic decisions are taken about the day-to-day workings of the party, from planning campaigns to discussing policies. In contrast, the most recently created Europarties are very loosely organized federations with lower budgets, few (or no) member parties, and a smaller number of seats in the European Parliament. They are led by individual politicians rather than by national parties.⁶ Thus, if the older Europarties

⁵ Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 1141/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, Official Journal of the European Union, L317/1, 4 November 2014.

⁶ When the new Europarty regulation mentioned is ratified, individuals will no longer be able to set up a Europarty – only national parties will be able to do so. The aim is to avoid individual members of a national party participating in the formation of more than one Europarty in order to maximise access to public funds (European Parliament, 27/02/2018).

are ‘parties of parties’, then those founded in 2010 and after could be described as ‘parties of a small number of individual politicians’.

Despite such elitist structures, 13 out of 16 Europarties currently allow natural persons to join. The existing Europarty regulations are vague on individual membership, which gives parties the freedom to decide how far they want to go. The 2014 regulation merely obliges Europarties to include ‘the rights and duties associated with all types of membership and the relevant voting rights’ into their statutes. Whether or not they let natural persons join, and under what conditions, is their decision. The older Europarties had to change their rulebooks when they introduced individual membership, a decision that their (full) member parties had to ratify.

The largest Europarty, the EPP, was the first to introduce ‘supporting membership’ in 1990 in an attempt to create ‘a real party with members’ (EPP 1, interview with author). However, the party still only has a few hundred supporting members. The EPP offers ‘direct’ membership to individuals, which means that anyone signing up to their values (and who isn’t already a member of a rival party) can join as a supporting member for € 20 per annum. Supporting members are sometimes invited to attend working group meetings, but this is not a formal right. The supporting members themselves do not organize any events or election campaigns, and they do not have a designated website or social network presence. Overall, the EPP sees supporting membership as ‘primarily a symbolic membership’ (EPP 2, interview with author).

In 2004, the European Green Party (EGP) was the second Europarty to introduce individual membership (‘individual supporters’). The ‘Individual Supporters Network’ (ISN) was originally set up in 2002 by grassroots members of the green parties of Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. However, it took until 2009 for the ISN to become a formal coordination structure. In March 2014, the EGP had 1051 individual supporters. In contrast to the EPP, the EGP only offers ‘indirect’ membership, as all individual supporters have to be members of national green parties. The EGP charges an annual membership fee of € 24 per annum, which the members pay in addition to national party fees. In addition, the European Greens have introduced the notion of ‘friends’: anyone can become a friend of the EGP without being charged. The number of friends is slowly rising whilst the number of members appears to be stagnating.

The second largest Europarty, the PES, had introduced a type of individual membership during the 1990s, which, however, failed to take off because of a lack of funding

and official recognition (Day and Shaw 2006, 113). The party re-introduced individual membership, the 'PES activists', in 2005 under the leadership of president Poul Nyrup Rasmussen. He described the PES activists as 'the bridge builders between the national and the European scenes (Rasmussen 2009). All members of the PES's member parties are automatically members of the PES, but have to register online. Hence, like the Greens, the Socialists only offer 'indirect' individual membership to the members of their national member parties. About 200 city groups had been launched by PES activists across Europe, involving about 30,000 registered activists.

The centrist European Democratic Party introduced the possibility for individuals to join directly when the party was launched in 2004. However, in practice, individual membership has not been implemented. The EDP's executive manager explained that the party sees itself primarily as 'an association of national parties', and that the EDF was currently lacking the organizational structures to manage and promote individual membership (EDP 1, interview with author).

In 2007, the three-year old Party of the European Left (EL) also decided to introduce individual membership 'as a contribution to its future development' (Party of the European Left 2013). Individuals can register with the EL directly, without having to pay a fee. In countries where the EL has member parties (or affiliated political organizations) these can decide whether and how to integrate the EL's individual members. However, membership is also open to individuals in countries where the EL has no member parties. In April 2017, the EL had 600 individual members.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe only introduced individual membership in 2011. Former ALDE Secretary General Federica Sabbati said: 'the launch of Associate Membership for individuals is another step in the continuing development of the ELDR Party from a network of liberal parties into a fully-fledged European political party' (ALDE 2014).⁷ Like the EPP, ALDE offers 'direct' membership to anyone signing up to its values who isn't already a member of a rival party. Today, many members come from countries where ALDE has no member party. ALDE wanted to give these individuals an 'ideological home' (ALDE 1, interview with author). ALDE had approximately 5670 individual members in 2017.

⁷ ALDE was called ELDR (European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party) before changing their name in November 2012.

The youngest Europarties also deal with individual membership in different ways. For a start, there are four new Europarties that do not allow natural persons to join them. These are: the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE), the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM), the European Free Alliance (EFA), and the Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF). Their individual membership schemes target elected politicians only. ACRE's chief executive explained in an interview that the party was 'focusing on establishing itself as a political force in Brussels, not as a grassroots movement' (ACRE 1, interview with author).

Meanwhile, Europeans United for Democracy (EUD) allows natural persons to join directly, but in practice, all individual members appear to be elected politicians. Unsurprisingly, the two Europarties that do not have a single member party allow individuals to join directly. The Coalition for Life and Family (CLF), for instance, accepts individuals for an annual fee of less than €150. In theory, the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF) also allows natural persons to join, but in practice, all individual members are elected politicians, and they are asked to pay €1500 per annum. They have voting rights at the EAF's Congress, as would be expected: after all, they are the only party members.

The APF allows individuals to join as 'supporting members' for € 60 a year, but provides no further information. Meanwhile, the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF), the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM), and the Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe (ADDE) do not make their rulebooks or any other information about individual membership publicly available. At the time of writing, ADDE was also under investigation for misusing EU funds (Heath 04/04/2017) and its website was defunct. It is therefore fair to say that these Europarties are paper entities without permanent structures and without grassroots members. Table 2 provides an overview of the Europarties' individual membership schemes. It only lists those five Europarties that have implemented membership for natural persons and have made the data available. In order to put Europarty membership into context, the next section will focus on national party members and their rights.

HERE: Table 2: Overview of all Europarties and their individual membership schemes (2018)

3. National party members and their participatory rights

Party members and activists were once described as the 'Cinderellas' of national politics,

neglected by scholars because they were perceived as unpopular and unrepresentative of society (Whiteley and Seyd 1992, 1). Much has changed in the meantime. Paradoxically, as parties have lost members, scholars have researched the members' roles, profiles and attitudes in much greater detail (Webb, Poletti and Bale 2017; van Haute and Gauja 2015; Scarrow 2015; Young 2013; Whiteley 2011; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Scarrow 1994a, 1994b). In the most comprehensive study of party members, Scarrow (2015) reveals that national parties have such diverse notions of membership that it is almost impossible to define what a party member is. Recently, national parties have responded to the decline in 'traditional' membership by introducing new, looser categories of affiliation, thereby becoming 'multi-speed parties'. Another response to the decline in membership has also been a trend for parties to adopt more internal democracy, 'a trend that transfers new powers to individual party members' (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010, 826). Thus, most internally democratic parties let their members participate in the selection of candidates for public office and the party leadership, and the formulation of policy (Rahat and Shapira 2017). In practice, candidate selection methods differ enormously between parties (Hazan and Rahat 2010). Traditionally, most national parties in Europe have selected their candidates by a relatively exclusive selectorate, consisting of party delegates and élites. In recent years, however, a number of national parties across Europe have adopted more inclusive models to select their leaders by holding open or closed primaries (Cross 2013; Gauja 2013a; Scarrow, Webb and Farrell 2000).

When it comes to party members' participation in programmatic decisions, the situation is equally diverse. Gauja (2013a, 117) identifies four different types of membership participation in the formulation of party policy, each of which could also apply to Europarties. First, direct participation means that individual members can directly participate in policy working groups and/or cast their votes directly in referendums. Second and third, there is participation through delegation and representation, where party members choose peers to represent their views and interests at a higher level of decision-making, such as party conferences. This is the most common type of participation within national political parties. Fourth, some parties offer their members participation in the policy-making process by holding policy consultations, forums or conventions where members can feed in their ideas. Although some parties and party families emphasize one type of participation over another, the different types of participation often co-exist within one party (Poguntke, Scarrow and Webb 2016; Gauja 2013b, 122). If Europarties want to be seen as 'real' parties, they should

follow the examples of national parties and let their grassroots members participate in the selection of leaders and the formulation of policy.

4. Europarties' individual members and their participatory rights

This section reveals the extent to which Europarties let individual members contribute to the formulation of policy and vote in leadership contests. On this basis, an index of members' participatory rights is developed.

Direct participation in programmatic decisions

Europarties publish their manifestos every five years in the build-up to European Parliamentary elections. Manifestos are the Europarties' most high profile and comprehensive policy documents and are ratified by the party congress. They guide the legislative activities of the Europarties and their associated party groups in the EP (Klüver and Rodon 2013). Europarties have different processes in place for writing their manifestos, but in general, Europarty officials and member party representatives were the protagonists in this process. The member parties tended to let a party official, usually the EU secretary, participate in the manifesto writing and checked the final text before giving their green light. Sometimes, Members of the European Parliament were included and civil society was consulted, as in the case of the EGP (Switek 2015). By formally including individual members into the manifesto-writing process, national member parties would yield some of their policy-making power to the grassroots.

It is therefore not surprising that national parties remained in the driving seat when it came to writing (and ratifying) Euromanifestos. Only the PES and ALDE have given their individual members some limited influence. Ahead of the 2009 European elections, the PES decided for the first time to launch an open consultation process that allowed the PES activists (but also the trade unions and other actors close to the PES) to send in their written contributions – an opportunity that many of them used (Hertner 2011, 333-334). Meanwhile, for the 2014 manifesto, ALDE's individual members elected two conference delegates. These attended the 2013 party congress and made amendments to the Euromanifesto, most of which were included into the final text (ALDE 3, interview with author). The other Europarties have not granted their individual members the opportunity to contribute to their manifestos.

The PES has introduced another direct way for the activists to shape policy. After the 2009 European election campaign, in which the PES activists had been very active, the PES

presidency adopted a document entitled ‘the PES activists initiative’ which was inspired by the concept of the European Citizens Initiative: If 2.5 per cent of PES activists from at least 15 member parties or affiliated organizations sign a proposal or a comment on policies, the initiative is tabled at the PES presidency (PES 2010). Thus, whilst PES activists do not sit on high-level working groups - this remains a privilege of national party and PES officials – they can have some input in the policy-making process. The PES activists have already initiated numerous initiatives. One of them was particularly successful, namely the ‘European Charter for a Committed Social Democracy’, parts of which made it into the PES’s 2013 fundamental programme. The other Europarties do not allow their individual members to make policy proposals.

Another direct way to participate in Europarty policy-making would be for individual members to write their own resolutions. Like some national parties, Europarties issue resolutions on topics that matter to them. In the case of the EL, the Council adopts resolutions whilst in the cases of the EPP and PES the Presidency adopts them. If individual members were allowed to issue their own resolutions on topics that matter to them, this would give them influence in shaping policy debates.

In practice, there is a lot of variation. The EGP’s individual supporters can issue resolutions that the party leadership needs to take into consideration, and they can also make amendments to the leadership’s policy documents. A former secretary general (EGP 1, interview with author) referred to the ‘real agenda-setting power’ of the supporters. Yet, the individual supporters have never made use of these rights (Shemer-Kunz 2014). According to the ISN’s coordinator (EGP 3, interview with author) the network ‘lacks the organizational capacities’ needed to adopt resolutions and amend policy documents. At first, ALDE’s individual members were only given the right to make amendments to party resolutions, but they did not have the power to write their own resolutions. However, since the 2016 Congress, individual members have the right to submit their own resolutions. Unsurprisingly, the EPP’s individual supporting members have no such rights. Neither do the European Left’s individual supporters, although they are regularly asked to contribute to the EL’s newsletter, which is an informal way of communicating their positions (EL 1, interview with author). Meanwhile, the PES activists can participate informally in PES policy discussions through various online platforms. They also have a designated ‘PES Activists Forum’ through which they can communicate online. The other Europarties do not grant their individual members the right to write resolutions.

Delegation and representation

Like national parties, Europarties could give elected individual members the opportunity to participate in the formulation of policy through delegation and representation. To be sure, Europarties do not have local or regional branches that could send representatives as delegates to party congresses. This remains the prerogative of the member parties. However, Europarties could allow selected individual members to attend working group or Council meetings alongside member party representatives and thereby give them the opportunity to have a say in the party's day-to-day decisions.

Again, there is a large amount of variation between the Europarties. ALDE, for instance, has gone furthest by allowing one elected individual member to attend Council meetings. The Council is ALDE's second highest organ and approves membership applications, membership fees, the party's annual budget and accounts, and nominates the Secretary General. For an individual member to sit on the Council is an important right. None of the other old Europarties have such a system of representation in place. Sometimes, a national member party representative sitting on a Europarty committee is also a EGP individual supporter or a PES activist, but this is purely coincidental (EGP 3 and PES 6, interviews with author).

Like most national parties, Europarties could also invite selected individual members to attend congress. The old Europarties let their congress elect the president and vice-president (and in some cases also the secretary general), ratify manifestos and other relevant policy documents, and approve changes to the party rulebook. By inviting individual members to congress, Europarties would include them into the party's key decisions, debates and networks. Europarties could also grant their individual members voting rights. These would guarantee some influence.

The European Greens, Left Party, Socialists all allow their individual members to attend their party congress as observers but haven't granted them voting rights. In case of the EGP and PES, while individual members attend the party congress, put up stalls, and organize fringe events, they are not allowed to vote. The exception is ALDE, which has a system in place whereby for every 500 individual members, one delegate is selected by their peers (in an online vote) to attend the party congress. The exact number of delegates matters, because in 2015, the ALDE congress gave voting rights to the individual members' congress

delegates. Thus, ALDE has given its individual members the most extensive policy-making powers, despite being a latecomer when it came to introducing individual membership.

Vote in leadership elections

Traditionally, Europarty presidents or chairs were selected and elected by the representatives of national member parties at the congress. If they were to follow the example of national parties, Europarties should give their individual members the right to participate in leadership elections.

In practice, only ALDE has given a small number of individual members voting rights at congress, and therefore, the power to elect the president and vice-president. The other Europarties have not opened up their leadership elections to the individual members. However, it is worth noting that the EGP held open primaries in the run-up to the 2014 European elections, which gave individual supporters the opportunity to vote for two candidates for the European Commission presidency (the so-called *Spitzenkandidaten*). Yet, as the primaries were open, they can be seen as the EGP's attempt to be more inclusive and reach out to all citizens rather than its registered supporters and members (Put et al. 2016). The turnout for the Green primaries was disappointingly low, as merely 22,676 people voted (EGP 29/01/2014). The other Europarties did not hold primaries to elect their *Spitzenkandidaten*; instead, their member parties remained the gatekeepers in these contests. The PES activists, in particular, were not satisfied with this process. After all, they had launched a 'Campaign for a PES Primary' in 2010, demanding that the PES's *Spitzenkandidat* be selected by the members of the PES's member parties (Campaign for PES Primary n.d.). However, the majority of PES member parties objected to holding closed primaries, fearing a loss of influence. Thus, when it comes to the selection of leaders, the Europarties' individual members are less influential than many national party members. It should also be noted here that the Europarties' individual members do not have the power to select candidates for the European Parliamentary elections; these continue to be selected by national parties (Mühlböck 2012).

Having provided this short overview of the Europarties' individual members' participation in the formulation of policies and the election of leaders, we can now draw up a simple index charting these rights. The number 0 is given to a Europarty that does not grant a particular right, whilst the number 1 indicates that a Europarty has granted its individual members a particular right. As we consider six participatory rights, the highest score any

Europarty can achieve is 6. Table 3 (below) illustrates the findings. Adding the numbers, we see that with a score of 5, ALDE has given its individual members the most extensive participatory rights. The second and third places are taken by the PES with a score of 4, and the EGP, with a score of 3. The other 13 Europarties either do not grant their individual members any formal participatory rights (like the EL and EPP), or they have not implemented their membership schemes, like the EDP. Unfortunately, the youngest, least institutionalized Europarties do not provide any information on their individual membership schemes and could not be contacted.

HERE: Table 3: Europarties' individual members and their participatory rights.

5. Why such variation?

Europarties have introduced membership for individuals under very different terms and conditions. For a start, the registration procedures vary between the parties. Whilst the majority of Europarties offer *direct* individual membership and registration, the PES and the EGP only allow members of their full member parties to join them, which creates a type of *indirect* Europarty membership.

More importantly for this study, Europarties offer their individual members very different participatory rights. ALDE's individual membership scheme comes closest to what Scarrow (2015) calls 'traditional individual membership' of a national party: members have to sign a declaration outlining the party's principles; they pay annual dues; and they have some say in the party's key decisions. Meanwhile, the PES has the highest number of activists and a lively community spreading across Europe, but the PES activists' scheme is only a type of 'light membership', as the formal powers of the activists remain very weak. The same applies to the European Greens who have given their individual supporters few formal rights apart from the possibility to adopt resolutions. Light membership is a second-class membership. The other Europarties do not allow their individual members to participate in the making of policies or the selection of leaders. What the EPP and EL offer individuals could be thought of as 'cyber-membership' (Scarrow 2015, 30): they are formally registered party supporters who, however, do not enjoy any formal rights. This variation can be explained by looking at four interlinked factors, each of which will be explained in turn.

The Europarties' electoral successes

One obvious explanation for the differences in membership schemes is the parties' changing electoral fortunes. It has been observed that national parties, after losing elections, have an incentive to initiate organizational reforms and go to some length to recruit new members (Bolleyer 2009). Similar behaviour can be observed for Europarties. The EPP launched its supporting membership during the 1990s when its European election results were modest. However, as the EPP performed well in the following three European Parliamentary elections and was also well represented in the other EU institutions, the expansion of its individual membership scheme was not a priority. Meanwhile, the PES introduced their activist scheme in 2005 after two consecutive defeats in the 1999 and 2004 European parliamentary elections. The launch of the PES activists can be interpreted as an attempt to mobilize party members and generate electoral support at a time of soul-searching. After what was seen as another disappointing electoral result, in 2009, the powers of the PES activists were slightly extended. ALDE introduced individual membership after the other major Europarties, and granted its individual members more extensive political powers at a time when its electoral fortunes were shrinking. From 100 seats in the 2004 European Parliamentary elections, the ALDE group went down to 70 seats in 2014. Thus, both the PES and ALDE's introduction of individual membership needs to be understood as an attempt to gain more grassroots supporters and voters at a time of waning electoral success.

The attitudes of national member parties towards individual membership

If the old and established Europarties wanted to grant their individual members important rights, then they would need the approval of their member parties. For some Europarties, the opposition of their member parties was impossible to overcome. For example, when former PES president Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, together with Secretary General Philip Cordery, initiated the launch of the PES activists in 2004, his original plans were bolder than the final outcome. He had wanted to introduce direct individual membership. Yet, some of the PES' member parties were against this idea, most notably those from Central and Eastern Europe (Skrzypek 2013). The 'PES activists' scheme, as it exists today, was therefore a compromise between the new PES leadership and the member parties. A PES official explains:

The activists have become more complex and autonomous, and they have adopted their own structures. The member parties are generally more positive about them

now than they were a few years ago [...]. Enhancing their rights is a difficult question. The activists are looking for more, that's inevitable. The PES message is: if you want more rights, you need to work closely with the member parties.
(PES 3, interview with author)

Meanwhile, a leading PES activist also writes about 'the unwillingness of the national parties, but also the PES, to let the activist movement become too independent' (Der [europäische] Föderalist 24/03/2016).

Equally, many national green parties were suspicious of the individual supporters' scheme. This is best illustrated by a statement that appeared on the European Greens' individual supporters network website, which highlights that the introduction of individual membership was controversial:

Some EGP member parties turned out to have serious doubts about the idea, fearing that individuals might undermine their position within the EGP, or that political enemies might join *en masse* through the European door and harm their position back home. Others were afraid that energy put into European action would sap forces needed for their own programme. And yet others, the majority, were simply not interested or put the issue at the bottom of their priority list.
(Individual Supporters Network n.d.)

Thus, in the case of the PES and EGP, the opposition of member parties remains difficult to overcome. This is for two main reasons. First, they fear a loss of influence inside the Europarty's decision-making bodies, where so far they were able to veto all the important decisions about policy, strategy, and personnel. Second, some member parties are concerned that the Europarties' individual members might develop parallel grassroots organizations. Especially some of the oldest, largest, and most powerful national parties see this as problematic.

In the case of ALDE, it was a dynamic leadership team made up of secretary general Federica Sabbati and president Graham Watson that introduced individual membership in an effort to create a 'real party' with real members. A big push also came from some ALDE Bureau members who had formally been active in the party's youth wing, LYMEC. The latter had already introduced individual membership in the late 1990s, so a blueprint already

existed. Still, some national member parties needed to be persuaded of the benefits of individual membership. As a steering committee member put it, ‘horse trading’ took place: the individual members supported the candidacy of certain Bureau members, and these candidates, in return, offered the individual members their support (ALDE 4, interview with author). Thus, without the strong support of Europarty leaders and the agreement of the member parties, individual membership schemes would not have been introduced or enhanced. This, however, is not to say that the individual members themselves played no role in this process.

The individual members’ activism

The individual members’ themselves have played a key role in enhancing their powers. Most notably, ALDE’s individual members have their own, elected and well-organized steering committee in place that manages their activities. The steering committee has fought for its recognition and empowerment with the ALDE Bureau and some member parties, and continues to do so. Having achieved representation at the party congress and voting rights, their next aim is to administer their own budget – a power that currently lies with ALDE’s Bureau. What might help is the fact that the individual members are net financial contributors to ALDE’s shrinking budget. In 2016, the individual members brought in over €15,000 which is more money than a small ALDE member party pays as their annual membership fee (ALDE 4, interview with author). Thus, it was a mix of organizational skills and financial resources that has empowered the individual members.

The PES activists have also fought for more recognition, and ultimately, voting rights at the party congress. For instance, the PES activists coordinator for Germany explains:

All PES activists think that it should be a real individual membership, that the activists shouldn’t have to be members of national parties. The PES introduced the activists in order to enhance its legitimacy, but it opened a Pandora’s Box: the activists are a well-established network now (...). And they want more rights. The right to vote in the party congress. They have started a petition asking for voting rights and might even go on a strike before the next European elections if they are not given that right. (PES 5, interview with author)

Despite such ambitions, the activists' lobbying for more power has not been successful. Part of the explanation is that the PES activists do not have their own, elected steering committee. Instead, their activities are coordinated by the PES secretariat in Brussels. Additionally, the PES activists don't hold financial powers as the PES doesn't charge membership fees. Some of the more ambitious activists have already lost confidence in the PES and its member parties' willingness 'to create a pan-European grassroots movement. We missed that opportunity, and the vibes are gone now', as a long-standing PES activist and founder of a PES City Group deplores (PES 6, interview with author). The European Greens' individual supporters also wanted to enhance their participatory powers but found it very difficult to convince the member parties. It appears that, for the PES activists and the Green supporters, the momentum for change got lost when they ran against a brick wall of national parties' opposition. The individual members of the other Europarties have not yet shown signs of revolting.

Party funding rules

Another factor explaining why some Europarties have and others have not introduced individual membership, and why some have given their individual members participatory powers and some have not done so, is party funding rules. In order to be eligible to apply for EU funding, Europarties currently need to be represented - in at least one quarter of the member states - by members of the European Parliament, of national parliaments, or of regional parliaments. Or, a Europarty or its member parties must have received, in at least one quarter of EU member states, at least three per cent of the votes cast at the most recent EU elections.

Most Europarties live of the funds provided by the European Parliament and, to a much lesser extent, of the fees paid by their member parties. The EP's funds are distributed among the Europarties according to a set scale that benefits the parties with the highest number of seats in the EP. Thus, those Europarties with many MEPs and large, fee-paying member parties, such as the EPP, do not rely on the dues paid by individual members for their survival. By contrast, some of the newer Europarties have zero or very few MEPs and member parties. For the Coalition for Life and Family, for instance, having individual members is currently the only means to register as a Europarty and receive EU funding. Yet, while natural persons can join these parties, it appears that their individual members are all elected politicians. These have full voting rights at the congress because they are the only

party members. This explains why right-wing populist Europarties, such as the European Alliance for Freedom, are - at least in the short term - not concerned with mobilizing the grassroots but with receiving EU funds in order to build up the party.

6. Concluding discussion

Studying Europarties and their grassroots links matters at a time when the European Union is increasingly perceived as a distant bureaucratic machine that is governed by a broad political consensus rather than ideologically distinct parties. For this purpose, this article has described and compared the Europarties' individual membership schemes. More specifically, it has investigated the rights given to individual members and developed a participatory index. In doing so, this research has highlighted two main findings.

First, the Europarties' individual membership schemes appear as diverse as those of national parties. Most notably, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats is the only Europarty to have given its individual members the right to vote at the party congress, where manifestos are ratified and party leaders elected. ALDE's individual membership therefore comes closest to that of 'traditional' (national) party membership. Meanwhile, the European Socialists and the Greens offer their individual members some participation, but very few formal rights. In fact, their individual members are 'light' members. They could also be thought of as campaigners, activists, or supporters rather than members – as their names (PES activists, EGP individual supporters) suggest. The other Europarties show little signs of developing a real grassroots membership, mainly due to a lack of interest and/or organizational resources.

Second, this article has found that despite the introduction of individual membership, Europarties essentially remain élite-driven organizations. Although some Europarties have given their individual members a limited say in the formulation of policy, it is the national parties who remain the key players when it comes to writing Europarty manifestos and other policy documents, and selecting Europarty leaders. The power struggles of the PES activists and EGP individual supporters reveal that many national parties refuse to share their power with individual members. The member parties also remain in charge of selecting candidates for European Parliamentary elections and for running their own election campaigns. As long as the Europarties' individual members cannot stand for elections, they will never be seen as fully-fledged party members. Hence, for the time being, national parties don't seem to be willing to give up their status as gatekeepers of party activism in Europe.

If Europarties want to become 'real' parties, they will need 'real' members in the

future. In order to attract and keep more individual members, Europarties should grant them stronger participatory rights (Bressanelli 2014, 171). After all, why would highly motivated activists give their time generously to a party that denies them a say in the important decisions and denies them candidacy? This puzzle would be worth investigating. One future line of inquiry would be to examine the motives, expectations, attitudes, behaviour, and background of the Europarties' individual members. It would be interesting to find out what drives individual members to mobilize at the EU level when the benefits of Europarty membership remain so limited.

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